Just Look At Me Now: Problems of Viewing in Film Noir

FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Edward Dimendberg (2004) *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*
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Edward Dimendberg's *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* sets itself some high goals. Armed with an impressive knowledge of philosophy, urban geography, architecture and planning, social history, cinema and studio history, and, of course, those films that can roughly be grouped under the title **noir**, Dimendberg aims to weave each of these strands into a coherent theory of the relationship between films noir and the spaces which they represent and create. And for the most part, he succeeds. Clearly and concisely written, and upheld by a staggering volume of research (amply attested to by fifty-three pages of endnotes that are remarkably light on superfluous or self-aggrandising commentary), this is in many ways an informative, insightful and often fascinating read. The text's strengths lie primarily in its ability to combine philosophical and theoretical readings of space and of film noir with a firm sense of cinema's genesis in both actual locations and in the materiality and constructedness of the studio setting; in its singleness of purpose and clarity of structure in the face of large amounts of information; and in its

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commitment to the interrogation of *idées reçues*, in particular the received image and definition of film noir itself.

Its weaknesses, however, are themselves products of these strengths. The grand sweep of the book, away from the more traditional, city-based noir films of the thirties and forties, such as *Double Indemnity* and *The Big Sleep*, and towards those focusing on highways and suburbs in the late forties and fifties, is a little too neat for its own good. Moreover, the later stages of the book often exhibit the kind of nostalgia for dark, mysterious urban spaces in which it accuses these later films of wallowing - a particularly surprising development, considering that it is the purpose of the book to formulate a wider definition of noir that can move beyond stereotypical approaches to the cycle. This somewhat confused shift from iconoclasm to nostalgia also causes some major complications to *Film Noir*'s representation of the role played by female characters in these films, up to and including the almost total absence of the figure of the *femme fatale.* Partially as a result of the rather hazy conceptualisation of femininity, but also due to a rejection of traditional critical strategies which focus on form in noir to the expense of content, the text's sporadic attempts to complicate the relationship between the camera as agent of the cinematic gaze and the gaze as employed by actual characters manage to say little and often contradict one another. Overall, one is left with a sense that some great points have been raised, but that the success of the book as a whole has been hampered by the very things that it sets out to do.

Early on, Dimendberg announces that 'The fact that only during the 1970s did Hollywood employ the notion of film noir as a marketing tag for films earlier labelled as 'melodramas', 'thrillers', or even 'psychological chiller-dillers' is well known' (5). In an effort to counteract this after-the-fact and arguably inaccurate form of labelling, our critic sets out to marshal a vast array of analytical tools and models from an equally vast array of disciplines. His sources include Henri Lefebvre, Deleuze, Frank Lloyd Wright, Baudrillard, Walter Benjamin, Sartre, Eugene Minowsky, Ernst Bloch, Le Corbusier, Bel Geddes, and Joseph Frank, (among many others), all of which he brings to bear upon such multifarious topics as aerial photography, military training films, gossip columns, train stations, town squares, plate-glass office buildings, cognitive mapping, media frenzies, seedy dance halls, theme parks, highways,

police roadblocks, elevated railways, national defence strategies, fully automatic cars, and so on. The result is a heady mixture of high theory and pleasantly chatty social history that helps to cast new light on both, clarifying the former and drawing (often surprising) meanings from the latter. Between these two poles, Dimendberg situates film, as a kind of mediating force between high and low culture, and all three - film, theory and social history -are used to inform and qualify one another.

Particularly helpful is the way in which he uses Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of 'seriality', a 'mode of cultural production directed simultaneously toward everyone and no one' (60). In serial culture, everyone is isolated from one another, but integrated by dint of that shared isolation, as well as by the cultural artefacts that they consume **en masse** but ultimately alone. Offering seriality as a potential cause of the urban anomie inherent in the noir universe, Dimendberg slips the concept smoothly into his ongoing reading of Mark Hellinger's *The Naked City*, which, he says, depicts New York as 'a series of discrete topoi that require maintenance by a servile workforce' (60) through the filming of empty, night-time streets and the use of montage. This in turn is then related both to cinema and photography's implication in the creation and perpetuation of serial culture, and to the disappearance of once-prominent neighbourhoods and landmarks from the centre of New York city. Although this constant flipping back and forth between film, history and philosophy is a tad frenetic and occasionally threatens to lose sight of the thread of the argument, the equal weighting given to each element results for the most part in informative and insightful analysis, and in an interpretive balance that is all too rare.

The moment of real triumph is the discussion of Henri Lefebvre's key ideas from *The Production of Space*. Lefebvre's book is an odd one to say the least, vacillating wildly between his own, often obscurely explicated terminology relating to space as a philosophical concept, and (in the context) startlingly accessible discussions of actual spaces such as houses and town squares. Lefebvre bases his text around the concepts of *abstract space, spatial practice, the representation of space*, and *the space of representation*. The point at which he defines these concepts is easy to miss, not least because chapter titles give little sense of their content. Even without this drawback, the definitions themselves demand careful re-reading if they are to be

properly understood. What is more, Lefebvre then uses these terms as if the reader has fully comprehended them from the first, and needs no further help - a strategy that assumes, with a rather endearing naivete, that academics reads books from start to finish in the order laid out for them. Dimendberg, in a section of *Film Noir* that illustrates wonderfully his enthusiasm, clarity of style, and firm grasp of the subject matter on every level, repackages these concepts in precise and lucid definitions. Particularly useful is his definition of abstract space as 'an urban space designed with less regard for the corporeal and aesthetic experience of those who navigate it than for the realization of specific economic ends, social policies, or technological functions' (104). Describing a space devoid of multifunctionality, beauty, or sense of community in any form, this concept ties in well with Sartre's 'seriality', and goes on to inform every aspect of the argument. Better still, when the term resurfaces, further explanation and contextualisation is provided - a huge improvement on Lefebvre's less forgiving approach.

Dimendberg's use of terminology is not, however, always quite so neatly managed. The way in which he handles the centripetal/ centrifugal opposition, taken from Frank Lloyd Wright's writings on city planning, and which essentially structures the entire work, is a case in point. The author's overarching purpose is to show how noir coped with the transition from an urban space where human activity gravitated towards a single, meaningful centre, to the spatial chaos, abstraction and loss of community which is perceived as characterising the suburban era. Nonetheless, it is not until p.177 that the provenance, precise meaning and original use of this opposition are definitively set out, a strategy the merits of which escape me. Of course, he is saving this explicit reference to the origins of his terms until the section on highways and urban route planning, which is indeed where they belong, rather than in earlier sections on centralised urban space where such concepts have no place.

However, this delay in explicating his central terms would not have been necessary in the first place were it not for that very trajectory from centripetal to centrifugal space to which the book adheres unswervingly. This trajectory forms the basis for the entire structure, and is as such one of the text's major strengths, in that it allows for a wider range of films to be included within the cycle than is usually the case. It is also, arguably, its greatest failing. By aiming to confer structural coherence, it actually

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succeeds in doing the opposite, and introduces a serious discrepancy at the heart of the argument. Early on, the author justifies his frequent use of the centripetal/ centrifugal binary by saying,

> Nostalgia and longing for older urban forms combined with a fear of new alienating urban realities pervade film noir. The loss of public space, the homogenisation of everyday life, the intensification of surveillance, and the eradication of older neighbourhoods by urban renewal and redevelopment projects are seldom absent from these films. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the movement of protagonists from urban center to periphery is a pervasive spatial trope. Unlike the contemporaneous conquests of the big sky and the open frontier by characters in the film genre of the western, the protagonists in film noir appear cursed by an inability to dwell comfortably anywhere. (7)

The implication here is that this formulation is applicable to **all** noir, and that urban change provided the impetus behind the creation of so bleak a cinematic universe, even if that change does not always form the actual content of the films. Be that as it may, near the end of the book, the author announces,

> *As we have seen*, throughout the 1940s film noir approached the metropolis, the classic setting of its narratives, with a *serene indifference* to the spatial anxieties voiced by the advocates of defensive dispersal. Menacing alleys, the shabby asphalt jungle of bars and fleabag hotels, and the pulsating neon cityscape situated the film cycle in a centripetal urban landscape seemingly far removed from the new spatiality of fallout shelters and a scattered and relocated urban population. (250, emphasis mine)

This makes little sense in the context of the remarks made early on regarding the nature of the centripetal metropolis (which could not be farther from displaying any kind of 'serene indifference' to the negative impact of change) such as this:

> […] film noir deployed representational strategies of avant-garde photography or modernist painting in the service of an aesthetic transfiguration *without* social transcendence. The metropolis portrayed in the film noir cycle seldom appears defamiliarized or re-enchanted, a space of genuinely enhanced freedom and possibility. Instead, it hyperbolically presents the contrasts and rhythms of the city […] as elements of a highly rationalized and alienating system of exploitative drudgery permitting few possibilities of escape. (14-15)

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And yet, as if such remarks had never been made, we are told of the city as depicted in later, centrifugal noir, 'No longer readily mappable through the presence of cohesive urban neighbourhoods or familiar landmarks, […] its earlier confident stability and electric vitality are less readily evident' (197). By placing the relentless transformation of the urban from meaningful, communal space to disconnected abstract space at the source of noir's pervasive sense of doom and gloom, Dimendberg has got himself into a bit of a tangle. On the one hand, he posits a yearning for lost unity brought on by the rise of the suburbs and highways as `the` primary drive behind the cycle's genesis in depictions of areas such as Los Angeles' Bunker Hill which are 'broodingly urban and mysterious' (158). In early noir, these areas function as images both of gritty authenticity and of reassuring continuity almost *because of* their air of menace and impenetrability. On the other, as this nostalgia fades away with time, it is replaced easily by a new, suburban, vagrant noir. This later form is predicated on precisely the same dislike of out-of-town housing developments and the interstate, but takes them as its direct subject matter, rather than as its absent driving force. In order to prove his second point, he is obliged to ignore all that he has said previously, as if to admit having said it would detract from the validity of the later argument.

Nor is this inconsistency the only problem created by the book's use of historical change. Leafing back through *Film Noir*, it is impossible to pinpoint exactly where, in the midst of all this, I began to get a sense that the films themselves, `qua` noir, had become lost, but get it I most certainly did. Of course, to a certain extent, this is the point. It is important to remember that the book never sets itself up as an introduction to or survey of noir - quite the reverse. Be that as it may, no matter how much detail Dimendberg gives us on these films (and there really is a lot), that atmosphere of ubiquitous crime, looming mortality, world-weariness and nameless angst in which they are saturated has somehow been erased. I should not like to suggest that a critical work ought merely to reproduce films as they are: in fact, it is in its refusal to resort to such tactics that the text is most successful. By grounding the geographical and emotional bleakness of the noir universe in the changing shape of the mid-twentieth century American city, and in the spaces that were thereby destroyed, subsumed or left isolated by new developments, the book avoids effectively the universalising tendency of many

studies of the genre. His section on the political, financial and bureaucratic strife surrounding demolished neighbourhood Bunker Hill in Los Angeles, an area that features prominently in the work of Raymond Chandler, is a particularly fine example of this method. The *anomie* and decay portrayed in these films is thereby shown to be historical and culture-specific rather than existential or general. As he puts it, 'Treating the city as expression of some underlying myth, theme, or vision has tended to stifle the study of spatiality in film noir as a historical **content** as significant as its more commonly studied formal and narrative features' (9). He laments that these 'formal and narrative conventions of film noir - 'low-key' lighting rich in shadows, voice-over narrators, crime story narratives, violent protagonists, and femmes fatales - are today indelibly associated with the film cycle' (5). Dimendberg's analysis has reclaimed noir despair from the timelessness of psychology and the abstraction that results from the triumph of form over content, and has returned it to the places and the moments that created it, while simultaneously drawing some interesting and fruitful parallels with contemporary and later theories of the spatial such as those of Lefebvre and Joseph Frank. The two major drawbacks to this debunking project, however, are fairly serious ones - the almost total absence of the figure of the **femme fatale** (and indeed of women in general); and (perhaps consequently) the somewhat muddy conception of the meaning of the gaze.

Anyone reading this study who is unfamiliar with these films would be excused for thinking that only a handful of them contain female characters, even though this could not be farther from the truth. Between p.5 and p.245, *Film Noir* contains only one, very brief and rather dismissive, reference to a femme fatale, a figure who I for one would have considered to be central to the very concept of noir, and who's relationship to the spaces represented therein might have told us much of interest. Indeed, the feeling of **un-noir-ness** to which I have been referring is most likely at least partially attributable to this all but total absence. It is all very well to wish not to repeat the stock formulae, but the femme fatale is far more than that. She is a potentially disruptive figure in the geography of the American city, unattached, childless, mobile and well able to protect herself (most of the time anyway). Whatever one might feel about her success or otherwise as a poster-girl for feminism, Dimendberg's near blindness as to her presence in noir, and his relegating of

femininity to the spaces of the 1950s home in the final pages, eradicates whatever spatial agency the femme fatale has ever managed to carve out for herself.

The first moment at which the feminine makes any appearance whatsoever is during the discussion of photographer Weegee, who was famous for capturing scenes of the seedier side of urban life, particularly in the shape of murder victims and collapsing or burning buildings, shot primarily at night. Utilising Laura Mulvey's influential 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Dimendberg re-produces Mulvey's configuration of the female subject as passive victim of the male gaze, teaming it with a highly essentialist vision of what constitutes the feminine. Concentrating on the figurative link between the (dead) female body and the depiction of New York in Weegee's book, *The Naked City*, and in its loose 1948 film adaptation, Dimendberg takes it for granted that we are totally *au fait* with what this female body **is**. His comment that 'In Weegee's photograph's the city is continuously feminized as the object of a controlling gaze' (55) does not permit the possibility that the feminine is an ideological concept structured and constructed by that very gaze, but sees it rather as somehow preceding and drawing the (male/ cinematic - the two seem to be interchangeable here) gaze to itself. The city, the photograph, the photographer and the relationship between all three are described in minute detail, but the absent half of the figure - the dead/ gazed-upon woman - is assumed to be transparent and already understood. What is more, despite saying that this 'raises the question of the psychosexual relations such a figure implies' (54), Dimendberg never explores these implications, turning instead to issues of fetishism and the relationship between cinema and photography. Obviously, he is well aware of gender issues, but seems to wish merely to gesture towards them, before skidding off rapidly in another direction.

Slightly more satisfactory is his discussion of *Killer's Kiss* (Stanley Kubrick, 1955). It is one of only three films from which Dimendberg quotes dialogue by a female character regarding her own situation, and the character of Gloria is dwelt upon at some length. However, as soon as the issue of femininity and the commodified female body is brought up, Gloria all but disappears, and with her, any form of real, human femininity. Zooming in, with the film's camera, on images of women on posters for the dance hall where Gloria works, and on the dismembered shop mannequins which two male

characters hurl at one another, the argument moves swiftly away from any kind of female agency or subjectivity, transforming women instead, as the film does, into pure material objects. This silent, unmoving ink/ plastic woman is merely there for the use and enjoyment of men - whether as weapons or as the objects of their unapologetic scopophilia. Much the same thing occurs in the section on *The Phantom Lady* (Robert Siodmak, 1944), in which female characters and voices are constantly upstaged in the analysis by a hat, and by male characters looking at and commenting on their wearing of the hat. Admittedly, Dimendberg carefully and insightfully exposes the penetrative, masculine 'specular regime' that dominates these films. However, by following too closely their use of the gaze, he succeeds only in reproducing and perpetuating, rather than fully interrogating or undermining it, this regime. There is a certain irony in the inclusion of the following passage from Lefebvre,

> In abstract space, where an anaphorization occurs that transforms the body by transporting it outside itself and into the ideal-visual realm, we also encounter a strange substitution concerning sex … The space where this substitution occurs, where nature is replaced by cold abstraction and by the absence of pleasure, is the mental space of castration (at once imaginary and real, symbolic and concrete): the space of a metaphorization whereby the image of woman supplants the woman herself, whereby her body is fragmented, desire shattered, and life explodes into a thousand pieces. Over the abstract space reigns phallic solitude and the self-destruction of desire. (145)

Far from wishing to be unfair to the author, it is abundantly clear that he knows what he is talking about; but he would do well to heed the advice of his own quotation, and not permit the images of women to elbow actual female characters out of his argument.

Another gap is the lack of focus on office space as a potential category for critical investigation – quite a serious one, considering the office's role as something akin to refuge and even home for the male protagonist, as well as being the medium through which he often meets many of those with whom he is to become entangled. Evidently, it is in an effort to move away from the stereotypical scene of the 'broad' entering the office of the private eye that he leaves these two gaping holes in his vision of the noir world. Be that as it may, the iconic (rather than simply stereotypical) nature of this image ought to point to the fact that the movement of women into and around the

male-dominated spaces of the city is central to noir as a whole. This movement is kept to a minimum in *Film Noir*, relegated to the brief mention of Gloria's night-time walk through a dangerous neighbourhood and the pursuit of the Phantom Lady in the film of the same name. There is a particularly apt quotation from the hired killer Claude in *Murder By Contract*, (Irving Lerner, 1958), who says, 'I don't like women. They don't stand still. When they move, it's hard to figure out why or where for. They're not dependable. It's tough to kill somebody who's not dependable' (245), an attitude practically identical to that of *Film Noir* itself. Women who move freely through the metropolis - *femmes fatales* - become mere ciphers for the city itself or are sublimated into material objects. Those who, in the 1950s, move only to move into the suburban home, however, (who thereby confirm the text's own movement from centripetal to centrifugal space, and who Dimendberg sees as replacing the now 'dead' *femme fatale*), get a little seven-page section all of their own towards the end of the book.

Again, however, this section is far from positive in its implications. After a pretty unequivocal analysis of the invasion of the suburban home by criminals and by the media in *The Killer Is Loose* (Budd, Boetticher, 1956), the author turns his attention to *Murder By Contract*, which, he asserts confidently, 'suggests the waning of the femme fatale in the film noir cycle at the end of the 1950s and the potentially greater agency of women in centrifugal space' (245). Billie, the female protagonist, is kept under protective custody in a domestic, suburban setting after having witnessed a murder. The suggestion that her 'independent mind [...] is reasserted by her preference for protective custody in suburbia rather than in a jail cell' (247), calls to mind (by inverse association) Betty Friedan's comparison of the suburban home with a comfortable concentration camp. He utterly fails to acknowledge the way in which the film associates the home with a prison in which women are either vulnerable to or protected by men, and likewise ignores what he has said himself about the home as portrayed in *The Killer Is Loose*. Neither of these films suggest that the home is a site of safety **or** of agency for women. What is more, confusingly, Dimendberg backs up his positive spin by commenting, 'Like many films noir of centrifugal space, the flat lighting, absence of camera movement, and avoidance of noir mise-en-scène deviate from common representations of the environment of the sexualized woman' (247). However, this 'environment of the sexualised

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women' has been but cursorily dealt with (and certainly not in terms of lighting and camera work), and is only evoked now in the absence and following the demise of its inhabitant - the femme fatale - who has herself been equally neglected by the book. The femme fatale has 'died' at precisely the moment when the full-time housewife is born, and jobs in the city - even residence in the city - were increasingly closed off to women, trapped as they now were in their split-level homes and domestic routines. *Film Noir* would have us believe thatthis development is for the better and, somehow, promotes the freedom of the female subject.

To give the author his due, this idea that the rise of suburbia places women outside of the tyranny of the specular which rules the metropolis, although far from fully explored here, is far from ludicrous in and of itself, and points the way to further investigations of the relationship between femininity and space. I should not like to suggest that Mr Dimendberg is a rampant misogynist, merely that there are certain drawbacks to his approach. In fact, there are moments when his analysis of the gaze in noir is genuinely impressive. Particularly well nuanced is the discussion of *The Phantom Lady*, which posits the film as holding out the possibility of a non-aggressive gaze in which two people, exchanging glances, recognise and confirm each other's subjectivity and individuality. Interposed between people, and preventing this brief but therapeutic communion are the hard, impersonal gazes of mirrors, which, in their proliferation throughout urban spaces, both inside and outside, stand in the way of human contact. More insistently, the third-person narrative 'voice' of the camera situates each of the characters (as Dimendberg demonstrates beautifully using examples from the film) as subsumed and rendered small, helpless and faceless by the interminable, arbitrary logic of city life and by the systems of surveillance - exemplified by the mirrors and by the camera itself - that objectify and interpolate but never fully engage with the inhabitants of the city. Worse still, the modern desire for transparent buildings - linked by Dimendberg to the emerging culture of surveillance - leaves the individual with nowhere to hide. Merging the film with the original Cornell Woolrich novel of the same name, Dimendberg describes both texts as establishing the 'urban social world as a void that necessitates refuge in a sheltering internal space' (35). Accused falsely of murdering his wife, the main character

> drives with the police through a metropolis … possessing 'the dream-like glide of unreal buildings and unreal streets moving backward past them, like shadows on glass.' Upon finding that no one will corroborate his innocence, he implores the detectives, 'I'm frightened; take me back to the detention-pen, will you? Please, fellows, take me back. I want walls around me, that you can feel with your hands. Thick, solid, that you can't budge!" (35)

However, this search for a place to hide is frequently unsuccessful in the film,

> 'If the gaze and the mirror provoke entrapment in socially defined identities and the empty spaces of the city elicit an anonymous identity, the numerous windows throughout the film never promote an equitable specular exchange. Their transparent openness never yields to spaces that are less threatening and more secure' (35-36).

Such passages make it all the more surprising and disappointing that the author should later accept whole and fully formed Laura Mulvey's somewhat monumental concept of the gaze in his discussion of the feminisation of the city in Weegee's photography. What is missing is an explicit acknowledgement of the difference of approach between the Woolrich/ Siodmak hybrid and the photographer, whose work is discussed only a few pages after *The Phantom Lady*. Unfortunately, Dimendberg sometimes has a tendency to treat his work as a series of more or less discrete essays tending loosely towards a single goal, and the possibility for fertile cross-referencing is lost. The point is that Weegee's photographs objectify - and thus, in the author's terms, feminise - the city, but that *The Phantom Lady* takes the violence performed by such modes of representation as its **subject**, rather than its **modus operandi**. Indeed, *The Phantom Lady* is evidently critical of a culture in which there is such an avid market for images produced by just this form of non-reciprocal, objectifying gaze. Had the film been directly compared to Weegee's work, both the argument itself and the concept of the gaze as set forth by the book would have gained in clarity and coherence.

What is more, other sections in which *Film Noir* tackles the issue of the cinematic gaze suffer from the same confusion displayed earlier in

relation to the centripetal/ centrifugal opposition. For example, the author says of Joseph Losey's 1951 remake of Fritz Lang's *M*,

> Driving through Bunker Hill, the cab driver surveys the street through the windshield of his car, a clue that the automobilized gaze has supplanted the overhead angle as a constituent element in the perception of abstract space. Spatial surveillance in Losey's film substitutes the roving, horizontal view from the automobile and the road for the fixed and vertically elevated perspective in the centripetal metropolis and the maps of Berlin on which the police draw concentric circles in Lang's *M*. Even when Harrow sits in a cafe, the camera mechanically approaches him through a fence, as if to prevent the viewer from confusing its technological vision with human sight. (222-23)

The imaginative leap here - from centralised, vertical surveillance to human sight - is surprising. It implies that a view from a car is farther from the human than one from a skyscraper. More importantly, it ignores the fact that surveillance as depicted in earlier chapters is impersonal and threatening, a function of the seriality and anonymity of the city itself, and so hardly generative of any kind of centrality or unity. What has happened to comments such as, 'the tall building as an architectural form that causes the central business district to appear menacing and ill-suited to promoting collective life' (95)? Or again: 'More than simply a motif of alienation, the vertical architecture of Manhattan's skyscrapers depicted in *Johnny One-Eye* presents an urban scale that thwarts contact and exchange with other human beings' (96). What is more, these early chapters never seek to set up the kind of monolithic image of noir's attitude to space that the later chapters seem to remember them as doing, but tend instead towards the symbiotic and the dualistic. As Dimendberg says, 'That so many films noir begin with elevated, aerial, or skyline views suggests that an essential feature of the film cycle entails the *movement* from a clearly delineated synoptic view of the metropolis toward dark street corners, alleyways, and other relatively inaccessible interior spaces' (69, emphasis mine). The point is that this form of noir relies upon the interaction of these two different kinds of spaces, and in particular, on the specular penetration of the latter (the dark, dangerous areas) by the former (the elevated, surveying ones). Thus, the comment on the remarks of a *Variety* reviewer on *City of Fear* (Irving Lerner, 1959) makes little sense.

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According to Dimendberg, the reviewer seems 'to yearn for the shadowy spaces of an older cinematic 'city of fear' no longer evident, if even possible. In a world threatened by nuclear weapons, darkness no longer posed the most frightening prospect' (257). Having very nicely shown in the section dealing with *The Phantom Lady* that darkness in early noir was more of a refuge than a locus of fear (or rather, that the major problem with darkness was that it might not be dark enough), *Film Noir* seems to forget having ever said any such thing.

These inconsistencies, both in and of themselves and in their relationship to his slightly fuzzy theorising of the gaze, are very much the products of the slant that the author has taken. Dimendberg's efforts at debunking the received critical image of noir leads him to wish to divorce his readings as much as possible from formal and stylistic elements; and his attempts to widen the range of films that can be included under the noir banner are weakened by internal contradictions. His all but total rejection of traditional objects of study in noir such as camera angles, lighting, and the femme fatale figure, although laudable in and of themselves, produces less than satisfactory results. The discussions of the ways in which the female body is used as a symbol for the city rather than as something in and of itself, and of the gendered specular regime that held sway in urban areas, would have benefited from a more fully worked-out sense of how the camera and the gaze inform or differ from one another. The introduction promises much on this front, but what follows delivers little more than disjointed references to these issues that are less than fully developed and ultimately go nowhere.

Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity has much to recommend it: a questioning attitude; primary material that is often neglected; and, insofar as philosophy, social history and popular culture are shown as being dependent upon and inextricable from one another, a healthy lack of intellectual snobbery. The shortcomings that I have pointed out cannot detract from the much-needed iconoclasm of its approach to film noir, and one can only hope that future scholars in this area will put Dimendberg's goals into practice.

Filmography

The Big Sleep, Howard Hawks, 1946

City of Fear, Irving Lerner, 1959

Double Indemnity, Billy Wilder, 1944

Johnny One-Eye, Robert Florey, 1950

The Killer Is Loose, Budd, Boetticher, 1956

Killer's Kiss, Stanley Kubrick, 1955

M, Fritz Lang, 1931

M, Joseph Losey, 1951

Murder By Contract, Irving Lerner, 1958

The Naked City, Mark Hellinger, 1948

The Phantom Lady, Robert Siodmak, 1944

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